

House endorses CHIP funding bill

By MIKE DENNISON IR State Bureau - 02/03/2009

Despite warnings of moving closer to “socialized medicine,” the Montana House Monday endorsed the bill that helps launch the voter-approved initiative to expand government health coverage for uninsured children.

Montana voters last November approved Initiative 155, with 70 percent in favor, to expand the Children’s Health Insurance Plan and Medicaid to cover as many as 30,000 uninsured kids in the state.

Yet the initiative did not appropriate the money to pay for the expansion, leaving that action to the Legislature.

On Monday, the House voted 57-41 for House Bill 157, which appropriates \$2.6 million to pay for the expansion through June.

Funding for the next two years will be in a separate budget bill, which has yet to be completed. Much of that funding also must be matched by Congress, which may finish work on its own CHIP bill this week.

All 50 Democrats in the Montana House voted for HB157 on Monday, joined by seven Republicans. Forty-one Republicans voted against it and two Republicans did not vote.

Republican opponents argued that while Montana voters supported I-155, they may not have realized its ongoing cost, its strain on the state budget and its creation of more health-care bureaucracy in government.

Rep. Roy Hollandsworth, R-Brady, said when voters went to the polls in November, they probably thought the state had a \$1 billion surplus, which has largely evaporated as the economy has soured.

“Knowing that (the surplus) isn’t true, they might have changed their view,” he said.

Rep. Tom McGillvray, R-Billings, also pointed out that under the new initiative, children in a family of four can qualify for CHIP coverage if the family earns as much as \$55,000 a year, and, for a family of six, as much as \$73,800.

“This has nothing to do with children,” he said. “If you want to vote for one more step to the socialization of medicine, vote for this bill.”

Supporters noted the strong public vote in favor of I-155, saying voters knew what they were doing.

“It’s clear from the vote totals around the state that voters want this to be done,” said Rep. Chuck Hunter, D-Helena, the sponsor of HB157.

However, Rep. Penny Morgan, R-Billings, one of seven Republicans who voted for the measure, warned that it might be difficult for newly covered children to find doctors who will see them.

The program not only expands CHIP, but also Medicaid, another federal-state program that pays medical bills for the poor. Morgan said the Medicaid payments to doctors are relatively low, so physicians often limit how many Medicaid-covered patients they will see.

“It won’t do any good to provide coverage for all of these people if we don’t have doctors for them to go to,” she said.

State health officials are in the process of designing the expansion and coordinating it with federal rules and funding.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., is the lead sponsor of a federal expansion of CHIP that passed the Senate last week and may be headed to the U.S. House for a final vote this week.